

after she was shot by 6-year-old classmate Dedrick Owens in Mount Morris Township, MI; Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, Jr.; civil

rights activists Hosea Williams and Dick Gregory; and Rev. Jesse Jackson, founder and president, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition.

Remarks on Departure for Capitol Hill and an Exchange With Reporters

March 16, 2000

Legislative Agenda/Oil Prices

The President. Good afternoon. I'd like to say just a few words, before I go up to the Speaker's annual Saint Patrick's Day luncheon, about three issues.

Yesterday the House took a small but significant step down the long road toward common-sense gun safety legislation. House Members from both parties have said it's time to get to work, after 8 months and other senseless shootings. It's time for the House and Senate conference to resolve the differences between the two bills and send one to me.

The American people have spoken clearly and consistently about the need to protect our children from gun violence. The House is listening. I hope the Republican leaders in the House and the Senate will listen and get this conference underway.

Of course, a meeting is just a beginning. Congress should keep working until it sends me a bill I can sign that closes the gun show loophole, requires child safety locks with all new handguns, bans the importation of large capacity ammunition clips. Again, I hope they will reconsider and restore the provision that hold adults responsible if they knowingly or recklessly let little children have access to guns.

A courageous bipartisan majority in the House has now said no to the attack ads, no to the name-calling, and no to the threats. They have stood up for the American people, but there are further tests ahead. The clock is ticking, and America is waiting to see whether Congress can really produce a bill that responds to the interests of our children and not the intimidation of the NRA.

I'd also like to say a few words about the budget the House passed yesterday. It is more than a balance sheet; every budget is. It's a blueprint for our future. For 7 years, our administration has worked to build a future based on fiscal discipline. The budget proposed by the

Republican leadership would erode that discipline. It would weaken, not strengthen, the foundation Americans have worked so hard to build for the future.

Before devoting a single dollar to pay down the debt or extend the solvency of Social Security or Medicare or provide a voluntary prescription drug benefit or invest in our children's education, the majority's budget already spends almost half a trillion dollars in tax cuts—almost half a trillion, and as the Republican budget makes clear, they're just getting started.

This is unrealistic, unwise. The risks it poses are unconscionable. It is as risky and costly as the budget they proposed last year that I vetoed. It would undermine our ability to make America debt-free by 2013, to strengthen Social Security and take it out beyond the life of the baby boom generation, to lengthen the life of Medicare and add a voluntary prescription drug benefit. It would slash our most pressing priorities across the board, from education and the environment, from law enforcement to public health, from scientific research to basic nutrition. It would be impossible for them to follow the path that we have all agreed on to modernize our defense forces and improve the quality of life of our men and women in uniform.

This is the wrong path for America. The only way they could meet their spending priorities with this tax cut is to go back to huge deficits. I asked the leadership to change course, to go back and write a budget that maintains our fiscal discipline and meets our most pressing priorities.

Now, the third issue I would like to mention very briefly is that I have just met with the Secretary of Energy and his team and my economic team, and we have talked about the present difficulties that Americans are facing because of the price of gasoline and the high price of oil, and what our short and longer term options are. And we've been working very hard

on this now for several weeks, and we hope to have some things to say about it over the next few days.

But this is—I'm encouraged by a lot of the developments that are going on. I hope there will be some relief soon when the OPEC meeting occurs. But I do believe we need to do more on our own here in America to deal with some of the things we've learned, some of the pressure points we've learned are on our people in these last few months.

So I just want to notify you that we are working on this, and we will have some more to say later, and I don't want to be late to the Speaker's Saint Patrick's Day lunch.

Q. Mr. President, on the question of gun control—

Oil Prices

Q. Mr. President, have you spoken in person to any of the leaders of the OPEC nations to increase—

The President. Wait, wait. The answer is, we have made clear what my public position is. I've said no more to anybody privately than I've said in public. I think it is in the interest of the OPEC nations and in the interest of the consuming nations to have a stable price of oil that gives them a fair return on their oil, enables them to run their countries and finance their budgets, but is not so high that it runs the risk of promoting inflation or recession, which will reduce the demand for oil by cratering the economies of other countries and hurting ours and hurting a lot of innocent people in the process.

So the trick is to find the right balance. Oil was way too low last year because they increased production right as demand dropped after the Asian financial crisis. Now, the price is too high because they cut production right as demand increased, when Europe and Asia were growing more again.

So we've got to get this back into balance. That's what I want to do. I think it's very much in their interest, and I haven't said any more in private than I'm saying to you in public, but we are working that.

National Rifle Association

Q. Mr. President, Wayne LaPierre, last night on the news, said the blood of Ricky Byrdsong is on your hands. I was wondering if you would like to respond to that personally, sir, and also

go to the underlying issue of enforcement? The NRA contends the administration has been lax up until very recently on the enforcement issue.

The President. Well, first of all, most of those—I think the television news, some of the reports answered the Byrdsong case in great detail, and I don't have anything to add to that. And again, I will say, I don't think—getting into a personal spat with Mr. LaPierre about tactics that I don't think any American appreciates and that all Americans can see through is not worth doing.

I think on the enforcement issue, if you just go back and look at the facts that were reported on the news last night in this case, I think it makes the case. The question is: What should the States do? What should the Federal Government do? What is the appropriate thing to do in the Brady cases? And I believe what we've tried to do is the right course.

I think the Attorney General has tried to increase Federal gun prosecutions. We've asked for resources to do more. But we've also tried to do it in a sensible way that left a lot of the burden and the criminal law where it belongs, with the local prosecutors. And I think to try to take a case like that, where actually the Brady bill worked—and if we had more comprehensive checking so that no one could sell a gun without a Brady background check, we'd have an even safer society—is not a very good argument for the other side to make.

And I think it's truly ironic that the NRA is now criticizing us for not throwing everybody in jail that fails a Brady background check when they opposed the Brady bill. If it had been up to them, we wouldn't be doing these background checks, and 500,000 more felons, fugitives, and stalkers would have handguns, so—

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Is there a break in the Irish impasse?

The President. Thank you. We're working it.

National Rifle Association

Q. Can I follow up on that, sir? Mr. President, why do you think the NRA has chosen this particular moment, though, to attack you?

The President. I have no idea. I really don't know; must be a good fundraising tactic. I honestly don't know. I don't know.

Q. Because they've had their way mostly on Capitol Hill, it seems, up to this point.

The President. I don't know. I think they know that the majority of the American people support us on this bill, and if they get the bill before the Congress, it will pass. So maybe it's some strategy to try to keep it from ever being in an acceptable form to be voted on one way or the other. I don't know. You'll have to ask them. I can't figure it out.

Thanks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:50 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president, National Rifle Association.

Remarks to the 1999 Stanley Cup Champion Dallas Stars March 16, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Please be seated. I want to welcome Thomas Hicks and his family, Gary Bettman and his daughter to the White House. Robert Gainey, the manager; and to all the Stars, including the captain, Derian Hatcher—I might say, the first American-born captain of a Stanley Cup team.

And I welcome Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson here, who is very proud of this team. We're glad to have you back in the White House. There are a lot of people from Texas here today, including many members of our administration and former members of our administration. I want to welcome you here. I often—I miss it when you don't come by. And now I know how to get you back. *[Laughter]* So thank you.

As all of you know, we're here to congratulate the 1999 Stanley Cup winner, the Dallas Stars. Ice hockey is a fascinating game, but for those of us who grew up in the South, we know it's normally dominated by people north of the Mason-Dixon line. There was not a skating rink in my hometown until I was over 40 years old.

But the Dallas Stars changed the perception of hockey. They were the first Sun Belt team to win hockey's Holy Grail in the 107-year history of the contest. So now Dallas will be known not just for the Cowboys and Super Bowls but for the Stars and the Stanley Cup.

It occurred to me when I was getting ready for this that hockey is a lot like Washington politics. It's a rough game—*[laughter]*—with a lot of lead changes. And usually you never know who's going to win until the final moment.

And that is, of course, literally what happened last June in game 6, when the Stars clinched their first Cup—3 overtimes, 111 minutes, all

of us, even people like me who don't skate very well, on the edge of our seats. We watched Ed Belfour block shot after shot, MVP Joe Nieuwendyk leading the charge on offense. And I still remember when Brett Hull shoveled the last puck past Dominik Hasek, a man I once met in Buffalo, to capture the win. I would be afraid to try to put anything past the guy. *[Laughter]* This was a very impressive game to those who are initiated and those who are becoming initiated into the thrills of professional hockey.

Opening and closing the year with a victory over the Sabres, that final game was a perfect ending to a nearly perfect season. The Dallas Stars not only took home the cup but also the president's award with the best record in the league for the second year in a row.

And I want to also acknowledge someone who is not here today, the coach. Every good coach I know, and I've been privileged to know quite a few great ones, always say that the players make great coaches. But great coaches also help the players bring out the best and play as a team.

The Stanley Cup is the oldest athletic trophy in North America. So it's about more than winning. It embodies our fascination with athletics, with determination, with teamwork. All the Dallas Stars earned this Cup. And after seeing Wednesday night's victory over the Devils, I see you're not going to give it up without a fight. I like people who don't give it up—*[laughter]*—without a fight.

Congratulations to all of you. And now I'd like to ask the commissioner of the National Hockey League, Gary Bettman, to say a few words.